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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 002048

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SUBJECT: FORMER PRESIDENT ROH MOO-HYUN: ACTIVE AGAIN

REF: SEOUL 01963

Classified By: POL M/C Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Former President Roh Moo-hyun's recent activities on the internet and in public have sparked speculation that he is vying to re-enter the political stage after six months of relative calm in his rural hometown near Gimhae. Initial speculation began when Roh officiated at a wedding with over 150 pro-Roh associates in attendance. On September 25, Roh began posting his dissenting views of the current administration's policies on his "Democracy 2.0" website. By October 1, Roh made his first public appearance since leaving the presidential office and criticized the government for disregarding the October 4, 2007 North-South summit declaration (reftel) and warned against pursuing a stronger alliance with the United States. End Summary.

The First Gathering

¶2. (SBU) Roh sparked speculation of his return to the public sphere on September 7 when he officiated a wedding at the Cygnus Country Club with over 150 officials from his administration in attendance. The father of the groom, Kang Gum-won, was the owner of the country club and a long time Roh contributor. Lee Byung-wan, the father of the bride, was Roh's chief of staff from 2005 to 2007. At the wedding, Roh introduced Kang as "a buttress for my political activities" and he introduced Lee as "a comrade and friend during the 'lost 10 years.'" The press reported that it was an exclusive gathering of all Pro-Roh associates and that Roh used the opportunity to strengthen their solidarity.

Democracy 2.0: The Roh Moo-hyun Way

¶3. (SBU) On September 25, reports spread that Roh was possibly planning a return to politics when he posted his dissenting views of President Lee Myung-bak's Administration on his "Democracy 2.0" website. Roh began by expressing his disdain for neo-liberalism and the current administration's handling of both the national pension system and the pending financial crisis. He wrote that President Lee's brand of neo-liberalism contributed to the global financial crisis because it was a distorted form of capitalism that provided the rich with free rein to speculate in the markets. Roh also added that the government had to reduce the risk of the national pension system by implementing supplemental

provisions or provide retirees with alternative solutions.

¶4. (SBU) Turning to progressive lawmakers from Seoul, Roh reserved most of his criticism for those who exploited longstanding regional competition with the Gyeongsang provinces to garner support within the provinces of Jeolla. He maintained that competition from several parties in the Jeolla-do area was necessary for democracy to fully develop. According to Roh, the Democratic Party (DP) could not become the majority party until it concentrated on reforming the electoral district system.

¶5. (SBU) Roh's activity on his "Democracy 2.0" website has received a varied response. The website was launched as an open forum for debates and discussions on social issues, but has now become a source of speculation as to whether or not Roh would return to politics. Liberal politicians postulate that the left-leaning leader could form a political front against the Grand National Party (GNP), which is struggling with internal divisions. Several GNP lawmakers also forecast that Roh may be attempting to create his own political party.

Roh Comes To Seoul

¶6. (SBU) Roh used the first anniversary of his October 4, 2007 summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-il to make his first public appearance (reftel) since leaving the presidential office. He criticized the current administration for disregarding the summit declaration and for potentially provoking North Korea by pursuing a stronger alliance with the United States. By not respecting the October 4 summit declaration, Roh said that the Lee administration was to blame for the current impasse between the two Koreas.

¶7. (SBU) Turning to the U.S.-ROK alliance, Roh counseled against placing full support behind the United States, saying that a strategy for peaceful unification could not be brought about with a nation that openly viewed North Korea as an enemy. He argued that Operation Plan 5027, a war plan designed to counter a possible attack by North Korea, served only to heighten tensions and had the added effect of harming relations with Russia and China. In reference to the nuclear issue, Roh opposed any military action to deal with North Korea's nuclear arsenal, saying that, "...holding up principles and maintaining trust (with North Korea) was much more important than such strategic concerns."

¶8. (SBU) Responses after the anniversary speech were highly critical of Roh. A Segye Ilbo (conservative daily) reporter, Cho Min-ho, iterated that the strained relations with North Korea was not the result of President Lee disregarding the October 4 summit declaration, but because of the shooting death of a South Korean tourist at Mt. Kumgang. Hwang Jung-mi, from the same organization, commented that Roh's statement served only to divide the nation by conveniently criticizing the current administration while failing to mention the shortcomings of his leadership during the past five years. Naeil Shinmun's (liberal daily) Yoon Yeo-yoon picked up the sentiment that Roh was a perfect example of why former presidents should not get involved in politics and said that they had to evaluate their effect on the public before they spoke.

Challenges for Roh

¶9. (C) The leadership vacuum in the DP notwithstanding, Roh's ability to exert influence in the South Korean political arena is questionable. He lacks the gravitas and international recognition of fellow progressive and former president, Kim Dae-jung. The public is discontented with the Lee Administration but not enough time has passed to conflate their frustration towards Lee with nostalgia for Roh's time

in office.

¶10. (C) Roh's influence will depend in large part on his ties to the DP. The April National Assembly (NA) elections saw the political demise of many of Roh's fellow "3-8-6" lawmakers. Surprisingly, however, some of that generation -- Kim Min-seok, Ahn Hee-jung and Song Young-gil -- did secure seats on the DP's Supreme Council, which could improve Roh's chances.

¶11. (SBU) Still, the requisite probes are pending into the alleged wrongdoing of Roh and his aides. Over the past few weeks, the prosecutor's office has widened investigations targeting Roh's aides and has raided the offices of Kangwon Land, the only authorized casino for Koreans. Allegations that the gambling firm was being used to launder money for political slush funds have implicated Representative Lee Kwang-jae, a former top aide to Roh Moo-hyun. Chung Sang-mun and Hong Kyung-tae, who both served as presidential secretaries under the Roh administration, are also under investigation for using their influence to promote real estate development projects.

¶12. (SBU) Roh himself has come under fire for carrying classified presidential records to his home in Bongha, South Gyeongsang Province. The GNP claimed that a total of 238 original disks of the "e-jiwon" system and 72 terabytes of records remain unaccounted for. GNP lawmaker Lee Jin-bok alleged that the Roh government replaced the original disks before President Lee took office and that Roh has returned only 25 percent of the presidential records to the National Archives since last July.

Comment

¶13. (C) Observers have long noted that Roh would attempt to assume a more active role in progressive politics. While silent on the matter, Roh's recent activity and rhetoric have continued to fuel speculation as to whether he will return to Korean politics. As stated on his website, "Democracy 2.0" was launched to facilitate open discussions and Roh's diatribes may simply reflect his preference to directly communicate with the public. Many, however, suspect that this may also be an attempt by Roh to re-start his political activities by connecting with his base. His supporters remain a minor but vocal group and, to date, over 300,000 people have become active participants on his website. These supporters would clearly like to capitalize on Lee Myung-bak's ineptness. Still, disdain for Roh remains so deep and widespread that a lot more than continued political clumsiness by the current administration may be required before the public becomes wistful for Roh. End Comment.

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